

Sustainable Agriculture

Volume 8, Issue 3 – March 2000

New organic proposal is good news for farmers and consumers, Fernholz says

The new proposal for national organic standards announced March 7, 2000 is a move "onward and upward" for both producers and consumers, according to Carmen Fernholz, state chair of the Sustainable Farming Association (SFA) of Minnesota.

"We've come a long way in cleaning up the original proposal," Fernholz says. "This gives consumers a clear idea of what 'organic' means.

"For producers, this makes organics mainstream. Consumer demand should be enhanced, which means producers can make decisions based on growth and stability in organic markets.

"Corporations will now be getting into the organic business big time, and that's okay," he says. "As producers, we need to manage the system and build a safety net, which includes monitoring production levels."

According to a USDA news release, the new proposal specifically prohibits the use of genetic engineering, sewage sludge and irradiation in the production of food products labeled "organic." The proposal also prohibits antibiotics in organic livestock production and requires 100 percent organic feed for organic livestock.

The proposed standards "will help stimulate one of the fastest growing sectors of American agriculture," according to the USDA release. USDA estimates that the value of retail sales of organic foods in 1999 was approximately \$6 billion. The number of organic farmers is increasing about 12 percent per year and now stands at about 12,200 nationwide, most of them small-scale producers.

More information on the new proposal is available at www.ams.usda.gov/nop. Fernholz may be reached at (320) 598-3010, or fernholz@umn.edu.

'The system works,' USDA official says

There were over 275,000 comments in response to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's initial organic standards proposal in December 1997. "Although it was a horrible proposal, the good news is that the system worked," says Kathleen Merrigan, administrator of USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. Merrigan was a keynote speaker at the Minnesota Organic Conference and Trade Show Feb. 15-16 in St. Cloud.

"USDA 'got it' with all the letters," Merrigan says, and the proposal went back to the drawing boards. "USDA is a big, powerful agency, but the good news is that people made their voices heard," she says.

"The letters were very effective. The majority of them were very unique, like they'd been written by individuals sitting at the kitchen table."

From 1994 to June 1999, Merrigan was a senior analyst for the Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture in Washington, D.C., where she promoted research and education in sustainable agriculture. "I'm glad I have a powerful position in USDA where I can push alternative viewpoints," she says. "The system is more open than I'd thought it would be."

Whatever your cause, think through your agenda carefully, she says. "The best ideas come from the grass roots." Merrigan can be reached via e-mail at Kathleen.Merrigan@usda.gov.

Soil quality a big issue in southern states

Here are some highlights from a sustainable agriculture meeting in Georgia attended by Bill Wilcke, engineer and coordinator of sustainable agricultural programs for the Extension Service.

- "One of the things that really struck me on a field trip to several cotton, grain and vegetable farm is how big an issue soil quality is in the south," Wilcke says. "Soils aren't very good and organic matter 'burns up' quickly in the heat."
- The concept of "growth of ignorance" is our tendency to encourage people to forget what they already know when we teach them new things, Wilcke says. "Instead of trying to build on people's existing knowledge base, we too often assume what they are doing is wrong and needs to be totally replaced with new ways of doing things."
- Survey results from Appalachian Sustainable Development indicated that low-income families had just as much interest in high quality, locally grown food as did higher-income families. Wilcke may be reached at (612) 625-8205, wwilcke@extension.umn.edu.

Whole Farm Planning combines family, profit and the environment

Minnesota farm families are facing tough questions—such as how to survive in an increasingly risky economic environment.

That may break down into questions such as: Should I expand my livestock operation? Would direct marketing or a value-added enterprise work with my farm? How can we bring a son or daughter into the business? How can I spend more time with my family? How can we increase community respect for our farm and agriculture?

After struggling with these questions and others, several Minnesota farm families heard about Whole Farm Planning. They used the concepts to alter their farm management, bringing more financial stability, improved stewardship, and a better quality of life for their families. They've discovered what most business managers already know—it's hard to succeed without goals and a plan of how to get there.

Whole Farm Planning, also known as Comprehensive Farm Planning, can help you:

- Develop a vision for your farm 10, 20 or 50 years into the future.
- Improve the profitability and efficiency of your farm operations.
- Bring respect from the community for your work in protecting the environment.
- Make the farm a safe and healthy place for you and your family.

A publication funded by the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) is available that describes Whole Farm Planning and some tools available to help with your planning needs. Ask your county Extension office about publication 6985, "Whole Farm Planning." Or, call the Distribution Center, University of Minnesota Extension Service at (800) 876-8636. Single copies are \$2.50 plus shipping and taxes.

New video looks at how farmers build markets for their products

A new video covers a wide range of marketing techniques used by farmers in some Northeastern states. The market techniques range from roadside stands to Community Supported Agriculture to restaurant sales. The video also looks at wholesale cooperatives, Internet sales and use of farmers' markets. Called "Farmers and their Diversified Horticultural Marketing Strategies," it's available for \$15 from the Center for Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Vermont. The phone number is (802) 656-0037.

Here's a new marketing bulletin from the Sustainable Agriculture Network

The latest marketing bulletin from the USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) is now available on-line. "Reap New Profits: Marketing Strategies for Farmers and Ranchers" is written for producers and the agricultural professionals who work with them. There are practical tips on how to get started in alternative marketing enterprises, along with examples of people using these strategies. The bulletin describes how to break into farmers' markets, establish pick-your-own operations and farm stands, begin entertainment farming, open a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm, start a cooperative, sell to restaurants, and use mail orders or the Internet. You can view it at www.sare.org/san/market99/index.htm.

Soil Biology Primer publication

There's a fascinating diversity of soil life under your feet, and you can read all about it in the "Soil Biology Primer" publication from USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Written for farmers, agricultural professionals, students and teachers, it highlights the importance of biological functions for productive and healthy agricultural systems, rangelands and forestlands.

You can get a free copy by contacting MISA at (612) 625-8235, or misamail@umn.edu.

New CSA directory links farmers, consumers in food partnerships

A national list of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms has been put together by USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN). The list of over 450 farms includes names and contact information for CSA operations in most states.

With CSA farms, consumers buy "shares" in the farms in exchange for weekly supplies of fresh products. And farmers receive a fair, steady source of income and a chance to learn more about what their customers like.

To access the new CSA list, see www.sare.org/san/csa/index.htm, where you can search by state. You can also receive lists of CSA farms in your state by writing to CSA/CSREES, 1400 Independence Ave., SW, Stop 2207, Washington, DC 20250-2207.

Conference on cooperatives April 26-27 in St. Cloud

A conference on "Cooperatives: A Tool for Community Economic Development" will be held on April 26 and 27 at the Kelly Inn, St. Cloud, Minnesota. Cooperative Development Services, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the University of Minnesota Extension Service, and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture are co-sponsors of the event.

Topics on the first day include the basics of cooperatives and what makes them unique. Breakout sessions will cover Cooperative Services—including housing, childcare, and health care—and Cooperative Businesses, with sessions on worker-owned businesses, value-added/new generation cooperatives, and marketing cooperatives. Sessions on the second day will cover different business structures available for a start-up business and the "how-tos" of cooperative development.

The registration fee is \$65 before March 15 and \$75 thereafter. Registration includes a reference manual on cooperative development and a list of resources available in Minnesota. The conference begins at noon on April 26 with registration and concludes at noon April 27. For more information, contact Todd Thompson of Cooperative Development Services at (651) 265-9630.

Looking for bedding? Try shredded newspaper

Animal bedding made from shredded newspaper is available from sites at Duluth, Virginia and Moose Lake in northern Minnesota. "Delivery is free and the cost is minimal," says Linda Schaumburg, with the job development for the handicapped program operated by the State of Minnesota. She says shredded newspaper bedding has these advantages:

- Newspaper absorbs almost twice as much per pound of bedding, compared to straw, and will last up to twice as long.
- Farmers say shredded paper bedding has lower levels of breeding flies than other bedding materials.
- A shredded paper and manure mixture decomposes rapidly when spread on fields.
- Shredded newspaper is not toxic to animals and plants. Also, animals don't eat shredded paper and the product is virtually dust-free.

For more information, including free samples, call Schaumburg at her cell phone number: 1-500-240-7116.

National conference on urban buffers May 9-11 in Nebraska

A national conference on "Buffers: Commonsense Conservation for Urban Landscapes" is scheduled May 9-11 at Nebraska City, Neb. It will examine uses of conservation buffers in urban and suburban landscapes, including design, installation and maintenance. For more information, call the National Arbor Day Conference Services at (402) 474-5655, or e-mail conferences@arborday.org

About this newsletter...

For the past year we've been funded by the Minnesota Extension Service and the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) with support from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

We're always looking for story ideas. Send them to the editor: Jack Sperbeck, 405 Coffey Hall, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108, (612) 625-1794. E-mail: jsperbeck@extension.umn.edu. Other editorial board members: Helene Murray (612) 625-0220, murra@021.tc.umn.edu; Tom Wegner (612) 374-8400, twegner@extension.umn.edu; and Bill Wilcke (612) 625-8205, wwilcke@extension.umn.edu

Our mission statement: To help bring people together to influence the future of agriculture and rural communities to achieve socially, environmentally and economically sustainable farms and communities.